

## Student Voice Key to Unlocking Inclusive Educational Practices

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### Abstract

A review of the educational policies and procedures across Canada's provinces and territories reveals that inclusion of students with disabilities in regular classrooms is supposed to be the main policy and school practice. However, inclusive education has also shown to vary in the ways it has actually been implemented and practiced throughout Canada. This paper presents the argument that in order to investigate the efficacy of inclusion. It is important to conduct research from the student's perspective since they are the recipients and participants of inclusive educational practices.

### Introduction

Canada, like many other industrialized nations, provides equal opportunities to school access for all children and adolescents. However, access alone does not imply equity in student school experiences (Dunleavy, 2007). A diverse student population undoubtedly calls for diversity in the educational practices and delivery of services for students. As such, a monolithic structure is unable to satisfy the needs of every learner and the challenge of education thus becomes the creation of classrooms, schools, and school systems that achieve equal opportunity and positive outcomes for *all* students. One way to overcome the challenges of inequity among diverse student populations is to engage in more extensive conversations with students and include their points of view into the school structure. Hearing what students have to say and integrating their perspectives into their schooling is therefore a valuable way of moving Canadian inclusive education practices forward (Dunleavy).

Education systems of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century did not include students' views, nor were they created to include all types of student learners (Crawford, 2005; Porter, 2008). The traditional system of special education was defined by segregating students with disabilities and placing them in separate classrooms or schools where programs were delivered by specialist teachers (Crawford; Porter). However, a shift in ideology occurred because segregated education proved in many ways to be ineffective for students with disabilities (Kauffman 2000; Kennedy, 1995; Thomas, 1997; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2005). For example, these students would often graduate, but were unprepared to lead fulfilling lives in their communities (Crawford, 2004; Porter). Furthermore, segregation meant that students with disabilities (from mild to severe) were isolated from interacting and socializing with their non-disabled peers. Researchers have found that not only do students with disabilities perform less well in traditional special educational settings (Crawford, 2004), but that inclusive education supports positive outcomes for *all* students (Curtin & Clarke, 2005; Kliever, 1998; Lindsay, 2003; Roehner Institute, 2003; Sebba & Sachdev, 1997; Willms, 2002).

In an effort to correct these inadequacies and fragmented practices, inclusion evolved as a movement towards the merger of "general education" and "special education" systems, and has gained increasing support over the past three decades (Downing & Peckingham-Hardin, 2007; Thousand, Villa, & Nevin, 2002; Timmons, 2002; Will, 1986). More specifically, inclusive education involves schools and classrooms adapting the ways in which they operate to ensure that all students are educated together in common contexts, and are treated equitably (Andrews & Lupart, 2000).

Inclusive education does not mean integration. Integration is viewed as a mechanism in which individual pupils are expected to adapt to conditions and practices in general education classrooms (Armstrong, Armstrong, & Barton, 2000). It is a structure designed to fit children into pre-existing systems and it also focuses on where pupils are educated rather than how they are educated (Armstrong & Moore, 2004). This differs from inclusive schooling practices, which extend beyond integration. Inclusion relates to a commitment and responsibility to the process of restructuring schools so that they respond to the diversity of pupils in their locality (Booth & Ainscow, 1998; Booth, Ainscow, Black-Hawkins, Vaughan, & Shaw, 2000; Lupart & Weber, 2002; Swain, French, & Cameron, 2003).

Historically, the inclusive school movement grew out of parent-initiated advocacy efforts that focused on the rights of their children with disabilities to participate and be educated with their nondisabled peers (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001). The current move towards inclusion has been heavily influenced by the human rights doctrine that underpinned the United Nations Convention of the Rights of Children (United Nations, 1989) and the Salamanca Statement on Principles, Policy and Practice in Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994). Kenworthy and Whittaker (2000) stated that ending segregation of young people within education was, first and foremost, a human rights issue, referring to the segregated special school systems as “20th-century gulags (prison camps) where the collective fear of children who are seen as different is assuaged and their segregation from other children is reconstructed as ‘special’ treatment in a ‘safe’ environment” (p. 219). Thomas (1997) and Tomlinson (2001) also posited that segregated education has played a key role in maintaining unequal access to services and resources prevalent within society, and perpetuating stigmatised labelling and categorisation of all people with disabilities.

It can be said, then, that *inclusion* supports the inherent right of each Canadian student to access equitable educational services. In Canada, indirect federal support for greater inclusion of diverse learners emanates from section 15(1) of the Canadian Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms, 1982. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms acknowledges that as part of *the Constitution Act*, the rights of all individuals are guaranteed, including those with exceptionalities. In addition, the charter challenged discrimination based on mental or physical disability. By the 1980’s, most provinces and territories provided some type of special education through a combination of regular and individualized environments (Dworet & Bennet, 2002; Weber, 1994).

Although approaches to, and definitions of, inclusive education can vary (Nind, Shereen, Sheehy, Collins, & Hall, 2004), the common thread that binds inclusionary schooling is that all students have access to an accommodating curriculum that plays to their strengths, as well as provides meaningful and challenging learning opportunities for all students (Bucalos & Lingo, 2005; Burnstein, Sears, Wilcoxon, Cabello, & Spagna, 2004; Idol, 2006; Roach, Salisbury, & McGregor, 2002; Voltz, Sims, Nelson, & Bivens, 2005). It is important to note that an important difference with inclusion is that it brings diverse students, families, educators, and community members together to create schools and other social institutions based on acceptance, belonging, and community (Carrington, 2006; Sapon-Shevin, 2003). To achieve this, educators are required to establish individual education plans (IEPs). IEPs form expectations for all students, are based on the general education curriculum, and offer differentiated teaching practices to accommodate students’ individual differences to help all students succeed (Ford, Davern, & Schnorr, 2001; Tomlinson & Eidson, 2003).

There has been a considerable amount of research (especially over the past 10 years) demonstrating the efficacy of inclusive education (Burnstein et al., 2004; Hunt, Hirose-Hatae, Doering, Karasoff, & Goetz, 2000; Idol, 2006; Loreman, 2007), as well as longstanding international support from bodies such as UNESCO (1994). Nevertheless, movement towards universal adoption of inclusive education policies and practices has been slow and inconsistent (Crawford, 2005; Idol; Porter, 2008). Hutchinson (2007) also argued this position. She reported that although inclusion of students with disabilities has become the dominant school service delivery model, it is loosely implemented throughout the country and each province and territory supports the model of inclusive education differently.

The reason for multiple approaches to inclusive education and constant inconsistencies in implementation is due in part by Canada being such a large country, has educational services that are highly decentralized. It becomes difficult to set policy standards when education is within the jurisdiction of individual provinces and territories, rather than the responsibility of the federal government (Crawford, 2005). For example, provincial and territorial ministries of education use quite different approaches in their annual reports on education. Typically, reporting is at a high level of generality with little specific information on students with disabilities or other ‘exceptionalities’. Therefore, this decentralized system of education creates significant challenges to gaining information about a

province's educational policies, programs, school and classroom practices, numbers of students by various statuses (e.g., visible minority, gender, disabled, etc.), and how students are faring in the country as a whole (Crawford).

Undeniably, such an ad hoc model of inclusive education is unlikely to succeed unless strategies are planned, implemented, and promoted. As well, the flexibility and willingness of all stakeholders to support and advance the philosophy of inclusive education is of paramount importance (Bunch & Valeo, 2009; Crawford, 2005).

### The Insider's Perspective

Currently, public schools that are operating under the banner of inclusion should provide programs that meet the varying needs and interests of their diverse student populations (Banks, 2001; Lupart & Webber, 2002). However, there seems to be a disconnect between the concept of inclusive education and that which is actually practiced within schools and classrooms (Hutchinson, 2007). Therefore, one cannot claim the efficacy of inclusive schooling without hearing directly from the recipients and participants of this type of schooling.

Since students are the primary users and receivers of inclusive education, their input is vital to understanding if an inclusive system is in place and how affectively and/or successfully it is being implemented. Within the school context there is growing evidence that children do better personally, socially, and academically when they are encouraged to take ownership of their learning (Bearne, 2002; Cox, 2000; Weare, 2000). It is for these reasons that students' perspectives are critical to understanding the current inclusive education system.

A number of studies provide some evidence to support this belief and have documented that repeated contact with students with disabilities (such as students with intellectual disabilities) within general educational settings can have a positive impact on the attitudes of their non-disabled peers (e.g., Bunch & Valeo, 2004; Esposito & Reed, 1986; Krajewski & Flaherty, 2000; Slininger, Sherrill, & Jankowski, 2000; Townsend, Wilton, & Vakilrad, 1993). Therefore, it has been concluded that students without disabilities can benefit personally from being in an inclusive environment (Fisher, 1999; Helmstetter, Peck, & Giangreggio, 1994; Roeher Institute, 2003).

### Motive for Listening to Student Voice

Students represent hidden voices who, if listened to, may assist in making schools and classrooms more inclusive (Ainscow, Farrell, Tweddle, & Malki, 1999). Failure to engage more deeply with students in conversations about their learning increases the risk of student disengagement from the experience of school (Dunleavy, 2008). Students do have a voice and it is unfortunate that many students, especially those from the most vulnerable groups, continue to voice that school is not for them. Dunleavy reported that decisions to leave school early and persistent dropout rates send a compelling message to school systems about the value in seeking students' perceptions of their school experiences. Listening to students' views provides a powerful mechanism for connecting with students whose voices are often marginalized at school. By incorporating students' perspectives into school systems, students are more likely to become actively involved, committed to their community and larger society as they transition to adulthood (Booth & Ainscow, 2002; Shogren, et al., 2007; Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003).

Listening to what students have to say about their educational experiences is one way to determine the best methods required to support their needs and to assist schools to develop inclusive practices. Their perspectives can be considered when making educational decisions related to the implementation of curricula, school organization, assessment of learning outcomes, and practices that enable each student (with or without a disability) to fully participate in an inclusive school environment (Corbett, 2001; Sebba & Sachdev, 1997).

The background literature on inclusive education has so far, focused on research aimed at examining the beliefs, attitudes, and values from teachers', parents', and administrators' perspectives (Bearne, 2002; Cox, 2000; Weare, 2000). There is limited research conducted on inclusive policies and practices from the students' perspective. McLaughlin, Warren, and Scofield (1996) noted that a large amount of educational research has investigated students with special needs (particularly those with learning disabilities, social and behavioural problems, and intellectual/development disabilities) more than any other type of educational group. Despite this fact, this research rarely considers the impact of inclusive education on these students from their perspective.

Further supporting this notion, Giangreco, Edelman, and Broer (2001) claimed that “absent from the literature are the perspectives of students who receive paraprofessional supports” (p. 59). Giangreco et al. stated that “we need to spend more time listening to and trying to understand the perspectives of self advocates” (p. 59). Some research has been conducted, which has explored the views, perspectives, and experiences of students with disabilities with regard to their education with highly informative outcomes (Corbett, 2001; Swain & French, 2000; Gwynn, 2000; Hall, 2001; Keith, 1994, 2001; Oliver, 2000; Sainsbury, 2000; Souza, 2002; Wiley, 1999; Williams, 1995).

Although some researchers have been willing to consider the views of youth with disabilities and accept their right to participate in decisions and debates that affect their schooling, there is still evidence that students are not being heard (Morris, 1998; Watson et al., 2000). Therefore, Watson and colleagues have argued for more research to be conducted from the perspectives of youth with disabilities that will challenge the current notion of all disabled individuals as being members of a homogenous group. In turn, incorporating students’ voices should lead to a more nuanced understanding of the lives and school experiences of each student with disabilities.

### Benefits of Inclusionary Practises for Students

The majority of adolescents, including those with disabilities, report that friendships are an important aspect of school life (Swain & French, 2000). Positive relationships with peers are believed to contribute to feelings of social acceptance and a healthy development of self-esteem (Pitt, 2003). It has been argued that placement in a general educational school setting provides an opportunity for all young people to mix with a diverse array of peers, in an environment that reflects the “real world” (Graves & Tracy, 1998; Pitt, 2003). Middle and high school students in inclusive classrooms tend to have positive views of inclusion and believe that it helps them to understand individual differences, the needs of others, their ability to deal with disability in their own lives, and their ability to make friends with students with disabilities (Burstein, Sears, Wilcoxon, Cabello, & Spagna, 2004; Cook-Sather, 2003; Copeland et al., 2004). In essence, one of the key reasons given by students for attending a general education classroom has been that students with disabilities have a better opportunity to form friendships with a variety of peers, and hence become known within their local community (Alderson & Goodey, 1998; Bax, 1999; Butler, 2001; Hegarty, 2001; Kliever, 1998; Llewellyn, 2000; Sebba & Sachdev, 1997).

Another benefit to inclusive educational practices, as supported by research examining the self-reports of elementary students with mild disabilities is that their self-concept and classroom behaviours are comparable to their classmates without disabilities when they are included in a general education settings (Lee, Yoo, & Bak, 2003). Research suggests that the attitudes of teenagers towards individuals with disabilities have been positively influenced by inclusion. Students held positive attitudes toward being in close physical and social proximity to students that were categorized with learning disabilities or mentally retarded. The teens also maintained fewer derogatory beliefs about their disabled peers (Krajewski & Hyde, 2000).

There is additional evidence to support the effectiveness of inclusive education. Specifically, academic and social achievement has been found to be higher amongst students in general education classrooms, across diverse backgrounds and abilities (Williams, 2002). For instance, there are studies demonstrating that for elementary students with mild disabilities, inclusive schooling resulted in better outcomes, including improved standardized test scores in mathematics and reading performance, mastery of IEP goals, annual grades, on-task behaviour, motivation to learn, and positive attitudes toward school and learning (Hunt, Hirose-Hatae, Doering, Karasoff, & Goetz, 2000; Idol, 2006; Peetsma, 2001). Research has also revealed that elementary students with intellectual and development disabilities enrolled in inclusive schools, learned targeted skills, had more engagement during instructional time, and had greater exposure to academic activities than students with severe disabilities educated in special education settings (Cushing, Clark, Carter, & Kennedy, 2005; Freeman & Alkin, 2000).

### Barriers to Inclusive Educational Practices

By all types of students being represented in Canadian schools and classrooms, the following assumptions (Csapo & Goguen, 1989) are made:

1. Children can merge their own cultural needs and identity with their peers. This allows them to model age appropriate behaviors and skills.
2. Children can acquire academic and social competencies through interactions that occur naturally within the classroom (Hartup, 1983).
3. All children can gain an appreciation of individual differences.

However, these elements are not likely to occur unless they are planned and promoted; and, unfortunately, many educators do not agree that all students with disabilities should be educated in the general education classroom (Kauffman, 1995; Kavale & Forness, 2000; Macmillan, Gresham, & Forness, 1995; Zigmond & Baker, 1995). One concern often expressed is that inclusion denies some students the benefit of the intensive and individualized instruction they would receive in a segregated special education setting (Andrews & Lupart, 2000; Macmillan et al., 1995). One of the main reasons for this concern might be that general education classroom teachers often do not have enough knowledge of the nature and characteristics of students with exceptionalities (Chang, Early, & Winton, 2005). A body of research has indicated that pre-service teachers leave their training programs having received limited training and experience in how to teach students with disabilities and do not feel adequately prepared to teach inclusive classrooms (Cook, 2002; Shippen, Crites, Houchins, Ramsey, & Simon, 2005). Also, there is further evidence to suggest that many teachers do not feel that they are well versed in the skills, or have the time, necessary to adapt a curriculum to special learners (Hemmingson, & Borell, 2002; Llewellyn, 2000; McLeskey & Waldron, 2002; Wedell, Stevens, & Walker, 2000). Scruggs and Mastropieri's (1996) research found that teachers reported needing an hour more a day to plan for students with disabilities. In some schools, students with disabilities did not have access to the entire curriculum (Curtin & Clarke, 2005; Hegarty, 2001; Llewellyn). Physical education was one subject in particular where participation has shown to be problematic (Simeonsson, Carlson, Huntington, McMillen & Brent, 2001). Butler and Hodge (2004) reported that some of these students had limited opportunities to participate fully in their physical education classes. Exclusion from class activities led some students to feel like outsiders in their classes and unwelcome by classmates without disabilities. Schools were also reported as having difficulties in facilitating the full participation of young people with disabilities on school trips and other extra-curricular school activities (Llewellyn).

### Students' Perceptions of Inclusive Education

In order to understand if inclusive practices are successful and meeting student needs, it then becomes important to understand students' attitudes and how the practise of inclusion has influenced them. Prioritizing the role of students as active participants' in learning and educational change is not, as many authors note, "a matter of turning schools over to students" (Dunleavy, 2008, p. 31). Rather, it is an ongoing process of recognizing that "students are genuine citizens of their schools, not merely temporary captives of them" (Dunleavy, p. 31).

A case study conducted by Gordon (2004), examined the school experiences of eight children with Inflammatory Bowel Disease that attended inclusive public elementary schools. When asked if they liked their school, the overall sentiment was positive among all respondents. All students were able to list classes, activities, friendships, and teachers that they enjoyed. However, the students did voice the challenges and barriers created by their teachers, for example, being permitted to access the washroom as often as needed.

Another study conducted by Lightfoot et al. (1999) further supported students' positive perceptions of inclusive schools. The authors recruited 33 students with a chronic illness or physical disability, between 11 and 16 years of age, from a number of different general education schools in order to investigate the impact of the illness or physical disability on the student's school life. It was revealed that the students were able to manage the physical symptoms of their condition at school by developing a support network of both students and teachers. These students were also included in all the decisions about the services that they would require at school.

These studies reflect the vital information that students share when asked for their perspective of their inclusive school experiences. In these cases, the students have expressed that effective inclusive education is comprised of established support systems that emanate from the collaboration of peers, availability of required services, and teacher involvement. In addition to this, students' require that their input be valued when decisions are being made about their school lives and academic goals.

In terms of social development, students with disabilities reported that they tended to prefer placement in general education because their friends were in those classes, and they were treated similar to their peers (Bunch & Valeo, 2004; Fisher, 1999; Lee et al., 2003). These students also worried that special education placement would cause them to lose their friends, or to feel stigmatized and deficient.

Although some researchers have been more willing to consider the views of students with disabilities and accept the rights of youth to participate in decisions and debates that affect their lives, there is still evidence that they are not being heard (Morris, 1998; Watson et al., 2000). Hence, Watson et al. called for more research to be conducted from the perspectives of students with disabilities, which will challenge the universal concept of a homogeneous disabled child and lead to a more nuanced understanding of their lives.

There appears to be a general acceptance that inclusion is morally and ethically the most appropriate form of education (Curtin & Clarke, 2005), and there is some evidence that students can academically achieve at a higher level in inclusive settings as compared with segregated special education settings (Lindsay, 2003; Sebba & Sachdev, 1997). Nevertheless, the idea that the inclusion of students promotes positive attitudes continues to be a widely debated topic, both in the field of research and in the greater educational community. There is some research that questions the effectiveness of inclusion on the academic performance of elementary students with disabilities as some report that they perform better academically within special education programs (Dymond & Russell, 2004; Simpson, 2004; Zigmond, 2003, 2006). However, it is important to bare in mind that inclusion programs are multifaceted and varied in their implementation and the services provided (Idol, 2006), which can explain the different study results. Moreover, although many policies and legislations for inclusion have been put in place during the past 30years, what do we really know about how students feel about inclusion?

### Conclusion

In conclusion, it is crucial to hear from students with disabilities who are participating in inclusive classrooms in order to better understand their social and academic needs. More research is needed in this area in order to evaluate inclusive educational practices; and to do so effectively requires incorporating the views of students (with and without disabilities) and an examination of how they perceive their school experiences (O'Hanlon, 2003). Student input is the vital link to understanding the advantages and disadvantages of inclusive educational practices.

Furthermore, the importance of involving students in the process of monitoring polices and practices are widely acknowledged and occasionally practised (Hopkins, Ainscow, & West, 1994). The ideology is to go beyond treating students as producers of interesting data in order to explore how they might become partners in a dialogue that informs the life and development of their school community (Fielding, 1997). By doing so, this allows all the participants to be both the researchers and, at the same time, the subjects of research. If, indeed, the future of public education is to create inclusive classrooms, we then need to take into account the differences and needs of all the students, including those with and without disabilities.

Ultimately, the benefits of student engagement go beyond schools and support the achievement of broader social and educational goals. The way forward need not be as complicated and can begin by asking students what they think in regards to their education.

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